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## The Debates of '84

WASHINGTON

**W**hen real disposable income rises strongly during his term, the incumbent should win; he can truly say "You never had it so good." When the "misery index" of inflation plus unemployment has been cut in half, then the opposition doesn't have a leg to run on.

In such a bind, what's an opposition leader to do? He takes chances. He picks a woman to run with him. He stuns pols by predicting a tax increase and thereby turns the President into a weasel-worder. Most of all, he pins hopes on debates, where one roundhouse right by the challenger can surprise and pole-ax the champion.

That need to get Mr. Reagan into an arena is why Mr. Mondale has called for a series of six debates. Everybody knows he will not get six, but it gives him a negotiating chance for three.

The President, who must debate his rival, lest he hand Mr. Mondale the issue of "the empty chair," said this week two debates would be "as many as the public should stand for." The public would easily stand for three, but it is in the President's interest to debate as little as possible.

Let us assume Mr. Reagan finds a summit or something to traipse off to in September, and his spokesmen continue to brush off "a debate about debates" until it begins to look like the President is running away. At that point, he can grant his challenger only two debates, late in the campaign, preferably with a buffer of reporters to lessen the dramatic impact of one-on-one confrontation.

Here will be the Mondale opportunity, and both sides know it.

### They could be Mondale's big chance

The President will enter the arena the favorite not only to win the election but to win the debate. He is the Muhammed Ali of political debaters. People may forget his excellent showing against Robert Kennedy in the 60's and against William F. Buckley on the Panama Canal a decade later, but remember well his "there-you-go-again" clobbering of President Carter in 1980.

Richard Nixon believes that in a Reagan-Mondale matchup, President Reagan may "lose the debate and win the audience." That's his way of recalling his own classic debates with John F. Kennedy, whose 1960 campaign took off after Vice President Nixon did not easily defeat him, as widely expected. While Nixon was stiffly scoring debating points, Kennedy was making friends with the American voter.

What Mr. Nixon forgets in his comparison of the debates of 1960 and 1984 is that this time, the more telegenic personality is going in as the expected winner. President Reagan stands to gain little by a draw, which is how most debates end; Walter Mondale stands to gain much.

Challenger Mondale, like challenger Kennedy of a generation ago, will be surprisingly strong in debate. He has sharpened his skills this spring, while the unchallenged Mr.

Reagan may have become rusty. Debater Mondale will dismiss the reduction of inflation with "why didn't you tell the people you were going to do it by putting us through the hardest times since the Great Depression?" He will ridicule last-minute summitry by making it appear a cynical campaign stunt, which it will be.

The champ, of course, will be the counterpuncher, making put-upon faces during the blasts and resolutely running against Jimmy Carter, which he knows how to do.

But maybe — and here's the possibility the Democrats dream of — the President will mix up Lebanon and Libya, or make a dumb statement as President Ford did in debate, or pull a gaffe like Tom Dewey's "idiot engineer." In that crucible, it is always possible to say something that shows your isolation from reality and kindles your opponent's campaign.

Vice President Bush has even more to lose in his debate with Geraldine Ferraro, which will be billed as The Former Everything against The Former Nothing. But the challenger might slam the ex-C.I.A. chief and ex-Peking Ambassador around the ring: "How come the President signed a nuclear deal with the Chinese, with great fanfare, and then had to back out? Didn't the C.I.A. tell him at the time that the Chinese were helping Pakistan build the Islamic bomb that could destroy Israel? And by the way — why did your C.I.A. station chief in Rome try to help the Russians deny their part in the plot to assassinate the Pope?"

Never say the Democrats have no chance. The debates are their chance. □